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ABSTRACT

Focusing on outdoor education and recreation for the young child (ages 3 to 5), the paper addresses the meaning of outdoor activities, their attractiveness for young children, preschool and outdoor activities used at St. Andrew's in Columbus, Ohio, and characteristics of young children. Outdoor activities are defined as all pursuits that provide an inherently meaningful human experience that relates directly to a particular outdoor environment, i.e. air, wind, woods, lakes, snow, etc. Reasons for the outdoor environment's attractiveness and appropriateness for learning with 3 to 5 year olds include: providing a new, innovative, practical setting which incorporates an element of excitement or adventure; making it possible for children to be totally immersed in the environment; and allowing adaptation to service individual needs. Teaching techniques to use with young children include: developing a safe program (two rules are: stay in designated area and ask before touching); providing an important programmatic factor--flexibility; using a multi-sensory approach in teaching outdoor activities; engaging adult interaction with children; using positive reinforcement; and using pre-reading experiences when teaching activities. (ERB)

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Eastern District - American Alliance Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Dance

PART I: Outdoor Programmatic Considerations for Young Children

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Introduction

Today, our presentation focuses on Outdoor Education and Recreation for the Young Child--Ages 3 to 5. Our intent is to share with you the "What," "How," and "Why" of our outdoor programs for young children--not to enter into an indepth philosophical and technical discussion about children, educational principles, or recreation theories. The topics we will briefly address are

The Meaning of Outdoor Activities

Their Attractiveness for Young Children

Preschool and Outdoor Activities--Especially at St. Andrew's, Columbus, Ohio

Characteristics of Young Children

Definition

Before discussing the attractiveness and appropriateness of outdoor activities for young children, one needs to know just what constitutes such activities. Darst and Armstrong (1980) have identified outdoor activities as

> "...All pursuits that provide an inherently meaningful human experience that relates directly to a particular outdoor environment--air, wind, water, hills, mountains, rocks, woods, streams, rivers, lakes, ice, snow, or caves. A certain amount of risk, adventure, exploration, and travel are involved, depending on the nature of the activity."

This definition allows for a wide range of activities but eliminates traditional organized sports such as softball or soccer. This definition is the basis for the activities we provide in our program, such as, camping skills, x-country skiing, watercraft safety, and orienteering.

Attractiveness and Appropriateness

Why is the outdoor environment attractive and appropriate for learning with 3 to 5 year olds?

There are several reasons--let me elaborate on a few.

1. It provides a new, innovative, practical setting which incorporates an element of excitement, or adventure. Although some children have watched

activities on television, played with "outdoor toys, heard outdoor stories, or engaged in "backyard" camping, few have had the opportunity to spend time actually participating in outdoor activities. This unique experience is an alternative, fun, educational setting for the whole child, i.e., development of the social component (e.g., sharing and cooperation), emotional component (e.g., reducing anxieties), cognitive component (e.g., using gross and fine motor skills). Because of the uniqueness of the setting, role expectations and established responsibilities which are usually associated with educational and recreational settings are minimized.

2. The nature of outdoor activities makes is possible for children to be totally emerced in the environment. Although children may opt not to participate in a particular activity, their presence in the outdoors defines them as participants. The level of actual involvement may vary. However, more often than not, the children's inherent curiosity automatically induces them to participate in some or all portions of the activity. To date, all children who have expressed hesitation to participate initially, soon become actively involved. No child has ever been "forced" to engage in the total program. In fact, each child has numerous opportunities to "opt" out of experiences. Few have stopped. Primarily from those who have stopped, the causes have been due to fatigue or coldness.

3. Often one hears that outdoor recreation can be adapted to service individual needs, then why not for the young child? Children already have the basic skills to enjoy the outdoor environment--i.e., they can eat, walk, sleep, create, and think. Since children can do all these things at home or in school, then why can't they do it in the outdoors? Will modifying the environment in which children interact, affect their interest, skills, or

performance? Since children must adhere to rules at home, can they not follow procedures in the outdoor environment? Children learn about safety and dangers in the home or at school, can they not learn about those in a new environment?

Our outdoor program has dealt with these questions--and many more. This session will not only discuss our approach to these questions, but also explain the characteristics of the young child: --the outdoor experiential opportunities offered to young children; and several techniques needed by educators and recreation leaders in order to have children participate and enjoy outdoor activities.

Instructional Techniques

I will now discuss several of the teaching techniques used with young children:

1. Safety: We strive to develop a safe program. Considerations for emergency first aid, portable heaters for warmth, or fires for cooking are built into the program. Children are asked to follow 2 rules: stay in designated area, and ask before touching.

   A. Parameters of the free area are clearly described.

      This area has been thoroughly checked for "hazards" -- such as poison ivy or debris.

      Children are asked to remain in the area unless accompanied by an adult.

   B. Children are reminded to ask before they touch an ooject such as a plant, animal, or piece of equipment. A comparison is made to items found around the home or school with which they must be

cautious, such as a stove or an unfamiliar dog. A demonstration is used to stress the importance of careful behavior around plants, i.e., which may have hidden thorns.

C. In addition to rules, close supervision is provided. One adult to every four children is the recommended ratio. This ratio varies with the activity and decision-making opportunities.

2. An important programmatic factor is flexibility provided for children. Children are given the responsibility to decide whether or not they will participate. If they decide not to participate, an adult is available to "oversee" their desired activity. To date, this option has only been used to "warm" a cold child or to provide "rest" for a tired child.

3. The use of a multi-sensory approach is crucial in teaching outdoor activities. For example, taste, sight, touch may be used in cooking; or hearing, feeling, and seeing may be used with watercraft activities.

4. Interaction with adults is a primary component in having children engage in the outdoor adventures. Interaction is encouraged by

   a) setting guidelines for instruction that does not keep children inactive or unresponsive for periods longer than two minutes.

   b) using many open-ended, multi-response questions.

   c) modeling by adults proper actions to be used in the outdoors. Children are able to observe adult behavior which is a principle consistent with social learning theories.

5. Progressions must proceed from known to unknown and from concrete to abstract. Asking children to select items needed for a day's hike requires creative abstract thinking. They are asked to explain why

it is important. As children carry the pack and feel its weight, they are then asked to identify what is "needed" and what is "nice" to have. Approximately 80% of the 3 to 5 year olds can readily differentiate before the end of the session.

6. The use of positive reinforcement must be given. Our attempt is to be sincere but give children the chance to respond without receiving negative feedback. The use of open-ended questions allow children opportunities to be innovative in their responses. With "inappropriate" responses, an attempt is made to have children identify appropriate responses by guided and selected questioning techniques. Explanations are bases on demonstration procedures, rather than abstract logical reasoning.
7. The teaching activities use pre-reading experiences. Our techniques constantly include pictures, demonstrations, and color codes to communicate information. Examples include the picture of an individual carrying a flag for the proper way of walking with a hot dog on a long stick; or color coding map directions to correspond with similarly colored compass headings.

In addition to these techniques, all teachers and leaders are advised to read the children's body language to identify feelings, attitudes, and interests. When leading or teaching activities, be prepared to quickly modify ineffective techniques. Never let a child's attention obviously wander. Plan appropriate bathroom and rest spots, schedule a variety of activities for varying but brief periods of time, interchange physically mobile with less active activities.

In summarizing, flexibility, safety, multi-sensory approaches, adult-child interaction, logical progressions, positive reinforcement, and pre-reading experiences are elements which must be considered for implementing an outdoor program for young children.

After searching the literature, let me conclude that the success of our outdoor program for young children and their families is based on several important and unique features:

A. Provides an element of fun and excitement while the young child is consciously unaware of engaging in new learning, deductive and inductive thinking.

B. Concentrates on learning outdoor skills and incorporating social interaction principles, rather than solely focusing on environmental awareness;

C. Use of active, creative, experiential outdoor activities which are based on children's need to participate and succeed; and

D. Interaction and sharing of educators and leaders with the child and family members in an alternative setting where traditional expectations and responsibilities are shifted, e.g., the teacher may be the decision-maker.

REFERENCES

Darst, Paul W. and Armstrong, George P. Outdoor Adventure Activities for School and Recreation Programs. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Burgess Publishing Company, 1980.